

Isaiah 40 (Part II)

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November 11, 2007

1 The Creator Has Not Forgotten (40:12–31)

1.1 The Complaint (v. 27)

The motivation of this section is the complaint raised by Israel in v. 27: “*My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God.*” This is a continuation of the theme first stated in vv. 6b–7. Does God still care about His people, who is in exile in the land of the Babylonian Empire.

When one reads this passage one has to be sensitive to what it is like for God’s people to be living in an empire. An empire is not simply a state; it is instead a totalitarian world view claiming unquestionable allegiance of its imperial subjects. It forces you to think in a certain manner; it forces you to comply to a way of living; it imposes on you an imperial agenda; it promises a vision of prosperity so long as you live in conformance. In short, an empire is not just a political reality; it is an ideology, a world view, a religion.

What hope do God’s people have?

1.2 The Incomparable Creator (vv. 12–26)

In response to the above complaint an eloquent exposition of creational monotheism is given.

v. 12: The response begins with pointing out who God is — the creator of heaven and earth, the one who is the sovereign Lord of the creation.

vv. 13–14: The infinite wisdom of the creator is pointed out.

vv. 15–17: The sovereignty of God over the nations is the focus here. (Lebanon is well known for its cedar forest.)

v. 18: This verse begins an section highlighting that the creator is incomparable to the gods of the nations.

vv. 19–20: The polemics are directed to the idolators. The folly of idolatry is exposed. As you read this bear in mind that, in the ancient Near East, the supremacy of a nation is the evidence of the supremacy of her god. It is pointed out here an idol is merely a man-made object.

v. 21: We are reminded that the eternal creator is older than the creation.

- vv. 22–23:** We are reminded of God’s sovereignty over both the nature and human history. (The “circle of earth” likely does not refer to the spherical shape of our planet, but rather describes the circular boundary of one’s horizon or the shape of the heaven as seen from land. The focus here is to point out the transcendence of the creator over the heaven.)
- v. 24:** The transitory nature of human kingdoms is compared to the eternity of the creator (v. 21). This verse transforms the complaint of vv. 6b–7 into a basis of faith and hope for a people living in an empire.
- v. 25:** A reiteration of the ongoing theme.
- v. 26:** The imagery here is that of a general mustering his troops — the heavenly host, which is believed by the Babylonians and the Canaanites to be their gods.

1.3 The Answer (vv. 28–31)

And it is in the context of this classical exposition of creational monotheism that the complaint of Israel is addressed: “*Why do you to say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God?*”

- v. 28:** Israel is reminded of the eternity, transcendence and utter otherworldliness of the creator (v. 28). On one level, the mentioning of tiredness and weariness seems to indicate that this is the core complaint of Israel: “Has God become so tired and weary that He will no longer save us from this evil age?” Yet on a deeper level it may actually reflect the spiritual condition of God’s people, that under the oppression of an imperial ideology they have become tired and weary. How are we to live out our servanthood, to be faithful to our vocation, when we are left alone in a demonic empire that vows to crush all who dare to be different?
- vv. 29–31:** The spiritual fatigue of God’s people is addressed by a beautiful illustration of how the creator God strengthens the weak and the weary against the forces of darkness. The regenerative nature of a creational monotheistic spirituality finds its full expression in the face of imperial oppression. A creational monotheistic faith reminds us the following:

*This is my Father’s world
 O let me ne’er forget
 That tho’ the wrong seems oft so strong,
 God is the ruler yet.
 This is my Father’s world:
 Why should my heart be sad?
 The Lord is King: let the heavens ring!
 God reigns: let earth be glad!*

In fact, creational monotheism is a core theme of 2 Isaiah (i.e., Chs. 40–55). A closer examination of this theme could help us better understand why the doctrine of creation is so important to Christians. Many Christians thought of creationism only when they want to credit God for the beauty of nature (or for the weather), or when they have to fight off the intellectual attacks of Darwinism. Yet, to those in Babylonian Exile, to those servants of God living in a realm hostile to the

Christian faith, the creationist faith takes on a much more existential significance, as we shall see in Isaiah 44.

2 God the Creator (44:1–23)

2.1 Polemics Against Idolators (vv. 6–20)

vv. 6–8: Here is a reiteration of God’s absolute sovereignty (vv. 6–7). Israel is called to be a witness of this fact. In fact Israel’s own national history bears testimony to this creator God. The people is encouraged to recall her previous encounters with this creator, in exodus from Egypt, at the foot of Mount Sinai, on entry to the promise land, etc. All these testify to the fact that God is the Rock, the one who can be trusted (the title “Rock” is used six times in Deuteronomy 32).

vv. 9–20: Here is a sarcastic exposition of the utter folly of idolatry.

vv. 9–11: The interpretation of the second part of this v. 9 (around the word “witness”) is very difficult. Here I follow the reading of Oswalt, who renders the verse as follows:

Their witnesses they are; they do not see, and they do not know, so that they are ashamed.

If this reading is correct, then Isaiah is contrasting the witnesses of God the Rock and those of the idols. The former shall not be ashamed, while the latter, placing their trust in dumb idols, become blind and dumb, and are thus ashamed.

vv. 12–17: The irony of bowing to creatures is so thick that it cannot be missed. The ultimate implication is that hand-made idols cannot save.

vv. 18–20: This is a classical analysis of idolatry. The consequence of engaging in idol worship is that the worshiper becomes dumb like the idol itself.

2.2 From Creation to Redemption (vv. 21–22)

The goal of the above analysis of idolatry as well as the affirmation of creational monotheism is to lead to the conclusion in vv. 21–22: God is Israel sole hope of salvation. If the Babylonian Exile was brought about by God to chastise His servant Israel, then God is the one who can wipe away the transgressions of Israel, and to redeem her from Babylon.

As Christians living in a world hostile to God, we are not so different from Israel in exile. Where do we place our hope of salvation? Do place our hope in the idolatry of consumerism, the myth of infinite economic progress, or the oppressive imperialism of Western supremacy? Isaiah reminds us that such are false hopes which will bring God’s servants to shame.

2.3 From Creation to Vocation (vv. 1–5)

The context of vv. 6–20 can be found in vv. 1–5.

v. 1: Israel is called to be a “servant” and God’s “chosen” once again.

- v. 2: Israel is reminded of God being her father and creator. Israel is given a new name, Jeshurun, the root of which could mean straightness or uprightness (Oswalt).
- vv. 3–4: The imagery used here is that of a people tired and weary in the dry land of Babylon. The images of water and spirit recalls God’s creative acts in Genesis 1:2.
- v. 5: The result of this transformation will be that once again the people are called Israel and “the name of Jacob”. According to Brueggemann, the other two names, “I belong to the Lord” and “the Lord’s”, are likened to “a stamp that is put upon a ceramic jar handle when tax is paid in kind. When the jar of grain is sent to the royal government, the jar bears the mark ‘belonging to the king.’ ”

Thus the exposition of creational monotheism is situated in a literary context in which the exiled Israel is called once again to be God’s people and God’s servant. This is theologically significant, for even in a land of exile, even under the totalitarian reign of an imperial ideology, Israel is still called by the Creator to be a chosen vessel. She remains the servant of God in the face of darkness and oppression. The question is, what then is the vocation of this servant? What could such a servant do in the empire of Babylon? This is a topic to which we will turn in the next lecture, as we start to examine the Servant Songs of 2 Isaiah.